

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION
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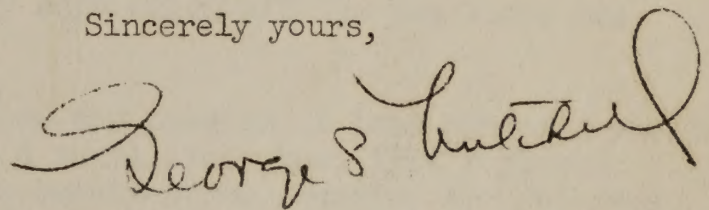
Office of the Administrator

To Farm Security Administration Employees:

The attached article on rural zoning from
Current History, which was reprinted in the
Reader's Digest, is unusually interesting.

We have been given permission to mimeograph
and distribute it to FSA employees, in order
that you may all have the opportunity to read
it.

Sincerely yours,



Assistant Administrator



THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
WASHINGTON, D. C.

Office of the Superintendent

TO THE LANDS OF THE UNITED STATES

The attached map shows the land owned by
the United States, which was located in the
State of Texas, in the County of ...

A map of the land owned by the United States
in the State of Texas, in the County of ...
and ... is attached to this report.

John J. ...

Respectfully,
...

RURAL ZONING

by Samuel Lubell and Walter Everett
Two former newspapermen who have made a
first-hand study of economic and social America

(Printed in "Current History," August 1939
and subsequently appeared in "Readers Digest."
Reprinted with permission of the latter publication.)

Six years ago twenty-three counties in northern Wisconsin were on the verge of bankruptcy. Taxes were going unpaid on from one-fourth to one-third their lands; nearly half of their farmers were on relief. Today those twenty-three counties are financially sound. Relief rolls have been slashed; some four hundred submarginal farm families have been re-settled; tax delinquency has been reduced to a minor irritation.

It sounds like an economic miracle. Incredible as it may seem, all this was accomplished by having these counties lop one-third of their lands from the tax rolls. They zoned off 5,000,000 of their 14,500,000 acres as unfit for farming. Cash on the line won't buy a new farm in those restricted zones. And every acre taken off the tax lists has been like money found.

Ordinarily, years must elapse before any program of land planning yields tangible results--particularly in a rural slum whose ills represent years of abuse and neglect. These twenty-three counties are cut-over counties, once covered with majestic forests, now pockmarked with sub-marginal farms. Picture "Tobacco Road" in a northern setting and you will have a fair idea of the harsh poverty of the region, the crude log cabins or tar paper shacks in which these families live, the unyielding barrenness of the soil, the difficulties in bringing land and people into balance.

Yet in a few years zoning has struck at the root of all these ills and laid the basis for the economic resurgence of these counties. It has solved, for northern Wisconsin, some of the nation's most perplexing agricultural problems, problems which still plague the rest of the country. Applied to other regions in other states, rural zoning promises to save farmers millions of dollars annually.

Zoning in cities, of course, is an accepted commonplace. This is the first time the idea has ever been applied to agriculture. So spectacular have been the results that six other states--Michigan, California, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Tennessee--have passed laws to permit their counties to do likewise. In Michigan four counties have seized this opportunity and have enacted zoning ordinances. Other counties in other states can be expected to follow suit. Easily the most important land-use idea born of the depression, rural zoning may yet become the foundation for the new national land policy we have been struggling to develop in place of our antiquated homestead laws.

A little simple arithmetic by a humble county agent inspired this pioneer experiment in rural zoning. In 1933 the agent in Oneida County, Wisconsin, was Louis Sorden, chubby, congenial, middle aged. Part of his job was to pass on all sales of lands which had reverted to the county through failure of its citizens to pay taxes.

Late one afternoon a farmer strode into his office to buy a backwoods farm abandoned some months before. Sorden got out his map and figured how much it would cost the community to furnish this farmer and his family with schools, roads and other services. He found the county would have to spend more in a single year than it could hope to collect in taxes in ten or even twenty years. As he checked his calculations, Sorden asked himself how many states had disposed of tax delinquent lands cheaply, just to return them to the tax rolls, unaware they were losing money on every sale? How many farms in Wisconsin and the rest of the country were costing the community more than they were yielding in human and material benefits?

"We're not selling that land," Sorden told the astonished farmer.

It was a bold decision. At that time, one-third of Oneida County's lands were tax delinquent. The county was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. Frantic townspeople and farmers were clamoring, "Sell the delinquent lands; sell them for anything and get them back on the tax rolls." It was a cry that has echoed in thousands of communities through the depression. Other communities chose the easiest way out, and heeded those cries. Fortunately Sorden had faith in his arithmetic.

Sorden knew too that only stern measures could save Oneida County. The delinquency that plagued Oneida and other cutover counties in northern Wisconsin was not of the "emergency" sort that could be corrected with a rise in farm prices. It was evidence of the region's economic collapse. Lumbering was dying and these counties simply could not support the cutover land left behind.

Cutover farming, at best, had never been more than a part time affair. Here and there the erratic glacier deposited from forty to eighty acres of fertile, stone-free soil. Lucky was the man who got such a farm. Generally the lands were so rocky that few farmers could clear sufficient ground to overcome the grave handicaps of a short growing season, distant markets and severe winters. Huge rockpiles, shoulder high and ten to twenty feet long, stud all the farms in the region, but most of the fields are still strewn so thickly with boulders that a plough cannot be driven eight feet in a straight line. As one despairing settler put it, "Rocks are the one crop that never fails."

While lumber mills and logging camps boomed, cutover farmers could find supplementary employment--that was where most of their cash income came from--and carry on the tragic farce of "farming." So long, too, could the counties absorb the excessive costs of haphazard settlement.

Many cutover farmers settled in the backwoods, miles from the civilizing influences of neighbors or towns. In clearing their lands they often started disastrous forest fires. Roads had to be run out to their farms; school transportation had to be provided for their children. In Lynne Township in Oneida County a road was built for one settler at a cost of \$1,200. It was used just once--when the farmer moved out of the county.

Some settlers deliberately went into the wilds to get school transportation money. One man in Ashland County built up quite a home industry that way with twelve children, until zoning put him out of business.

Often the total value of these farms was less than their yearly cost to the community. One family in Forest County lived seven miles from the nearest school, nine miles from town, twenty-five miles from a railroad station. It cost the state \$350 a year to maintain a road to the farm. The county paid out probably twice that sum for relief and school transportation. When the land was zoned off, the family was bought out for \$400.

As tax delinquency increased it became impossible to maintain such an uneconomic pattern of settlement. Lumber companies were dropping their cutover lands as they "ran through" their timber stands. Many farmers, with their chief source of outside employment gone, began to abandon their farms. Like crops in a drought, the tax base of these counties was shriveling away. The excessive costs of local government fell on steadily fewer farmers. Cutover farmers were paying two and three times the tax rate of prosperous farms in southern Wisconsin. To many settlers these higher taxes proved the last straw, driving them into default. Delinquency was proving a cancer which threatened to spread to the thriftiest farmer.

A major surgical operation was necessary. Sorden knew that. In the months that followed other persons tried to buy isolated, delinquent lands. Sorden would figure the cost to the county against the possible return in taxes and usually refuse to approve the sales.

The county commissioners stood by Sorden but found it politically difficult. The county couldn't go on refusing to sell tax-delinquent lands and letting it go at that. Some policy had to be formulated.

"Why not zone off all these lands as unsuited for agriculture?" Sorden suggested. "We can return them to forest land, for which they are naturally suited, build up their resort and recreational value and make money at it by closing off roads and shutting down needless schools."

Several years earlier a far-sighted legislature had amended the State zoning law to make just that possible. Walter Rowlands, head of the State county agents, was called in to help draft a model ordinance. Assisting him were George Wehrwein, land economist, F. B. Trenk, forester, and F. G. Wilson of the State Conservation Department. They were careful to draft only the legal sections of the ordinance, leaving details as to which lands were to be zoned off to the county officials.

"We had two methods of zoning open to us," Rowlands recalls. "We could have made a soil survey and marked off every farm below a certain standard. That would have been too expensive and wouldn't have accomplished what we set out to do. Instead we zoned off those portions of the county where farming was unprofitable, the tax yield next to nothing, yet the expense to the community pretty high. Whole areas could be blocked off and considerable economies in costs of local government effected. We could justify every restriction imposed, on a dollar and cents basis. County officials and farmers could take pencil and paper and decide exactly which farms were worth more off the tax lists than on."

That was the argument used to sell the program. In every township a meeting was held, generally with Rowlands in charge. There was no refuting the arithmetic of the argument. Farmers who came to the meeting openly hostile were converted. One group of settlers planned to break up a meeting. They were to swing into action at a signal from their leader. So absorbed did he become in Rowlands' explanation that he forgot to give the signal.

Oneida was the first county to zone off its lands. Within two years twenty-two other counties had approved similar ordinances. Nowhere was the idea voted down. Lands were divided into two general categories, those suited for farming and those whose use was limited to forestry and recreation. Farmers in the restricted zones were to be bought out as funds became available--about two thousand still are left--and no new farms could be started in those zones.

How much these twenty-three counties have saved in six years is impossible even to estimate. They have been spared thousands of dollars of expenditures for roads and schools which would have been required had new settlers not been barred from certain isolated areas. Actual savings realized through resettling some four hundred families already in these areas must run well into six figures.

Typical are these economies:

Marinette County bought up nine farms for \$7,200, zoned off the area they occupied and within three years slashed its budget by \$7,000.

The town of Morse spent \$150 to move two backwoods settlers out of a restricted zone and was spared the cost of building a new road and of transporting four children six miles to and from school.

Some counties swapped farmers public lands for their isolated farms. Several years ago a Chicago real estate firm took a would-be-farmer's last \$500 for a "farm" in Langlade County, worthless swamp land. The man went on relief. The county swapped him a decent piece of land for his swamp. Today that man is self-supporting.

In seven counties thirteen schools were shut down, and their pupils transferred to other schools, with an annual saving of \$15,000. One school was being used by five families. It cost the county \$2,580 to buy out those families--which shows how little their lands were worth. In that case, the county is saving something like \$2,000 a year in school, relief and road maintenance. So much for the financial saving. There is no way of measuring what it has meant to these families in non-financial terms to get off land that could not support them.

Most of the resettlement work was done by the Farm Security Administration. Roughly \$100,000 was made available by the F.S.A. in Washington for sub-marginal farm purchases in the area. Zoning laws are not retroactive and all the farmers moved out went voluntarily. F.S.A. agents would visit settlers in the restricted zones, explain the aims of the program and offer to buy them out. There was no fixed yardstick for measuring the value of the farm. How much was paid for each farm generally depended on who was the better horse-trader, the settler or the F.S.A. agent.

Farmers probably got a little more than their farms were worth, the F.S.A. being eager to help them get a new start. But there was little over-paying. Most of the cutover farmers were only too anxious to be bought out. The F.S.A. now has a "waiting list" of farms on which it has options and which will be bought as funds become available.

Where farmers who were bought out wished to continue farming, the F.S.A. helped them locate suitable land and, in most cases, started them off with a small loan. About one-third of the families, however, decided they had had their fill of farming. They took their money and went into the cities or left the State. Of the three hundred-odd farmers moved by the F.S.A., three-fourths were on relief. More than one hundred of these farms have become self-supporting.

Sorden, who supervised the F.S.A.'s purchases, has compiled figures showing that in the five years before zoning was started these three hundred

families drew about as much in relief of all kinds, from W.P.A. to drought and seed loans, as was paid for their farms, or roughly \$100,000. In ten years, Sorden estimates, Uncle Sam will net savings on relief alone, about equal to the cost of these purchases. The counties meanwhile will be several hundred thousands richer in having fewer schools and roads to keep up.

Less tangible than these savings but perhaps of more lasting significance is the fact that zoning has prevented the creation of hundreds of new submarginal farms and that it is aiding in building up the timber and recreational resources of these counties. Lumber companies, after stripping the merchantable timber, often unload what is left as "farms," frequently of little or no value for farming purposes. Such cutover "farms" still are being sold in the South Atlantic, Gulf Coast and Pacific Coast lumbering regions and in northern Michigan and Minnesota. In Wisconsin lumbermen must sell the "farms" to the Forest Service to be turned back into forests.

Already three-fourths of the restricted area in northern Wisconsin is back in forest land. Steadily the stands are being improved so that in the future they once more will support a lumber industry. Meanwhile the growing forests provide an ideal setting for a thriving recreation trade. Some counties are realizing taxes from zoned off lands through these recreational uses. Zoning can have its positive as well as negative side.

Until rural zoning is tried by other states there is no way of judging its ultimate importance. For sparsely-settled, maladjusted land areas like cutover regions, it has already proved its worth. Wisconsin's zoning experts see it reaping dividends in firmly-settled farm communities with good soils. Rowlands and Wehrwein contend that zoning can be used to accomplish any--or all-- of the following objectives:

- 1 -- Halt the spread of submarginal farming. Zoning off unsettled areas with poor soils will prevent the creation of new "slum" farms.
- 2 -- Prevent the sale of worthless lands to unsuspecting farmers. Lands can be plainly classified and restricted to the uses for which they are best suited.
- 3 -- Serve as a valuable guide for resettlement and submarginal farm purchases. If whole areas can be bought up and blocked off, economies in government can be effected.
- 4 -- Provide a blueprint for directing new settlement into compact, efficient farming communities. If a new area is to be opened, say the region around Grand Coulee Dam, the lands can be divided into several zones depending on their accessibility to existing community services. One zone can be opened at a time. Schools and roads already in existence would be utilized

to the utmost, and the tax burdens of the new settlers would be kept to a minimum.

5 -- Check over-expansion of such community facilities as schools and roads. Controlled settlement should eliminate haphazard road and school construction.

6 -- Set up a formula for the business-like disposition of the millions of acres which have reverted to states and counties in recent years because of tax delinquency. At present these lands are parceled out indiscriminately to anyone who wants to buy them. Through zoning, lands that are community liabilities can be withheld and the farms disposed of in order of soil quality and nearness to roads and schools.

The National Resources Committee has estimated that in Montana \$60,000 a year could be saved on schools and another \$50,000 in road maintenance and poor relief if eleven hundred families were moved out and their lands shut off from settlement. In Minnesota a special survey conducted by a committee of experts appointed by former Governor Elmer Benson listed economies totaling \$900,000 a year that would be made possible by zoning off twelve million acres and resettling five thousand farmers. No estimates are available as to the savings zoning might bring in other states.

That these savings would be tremendous becomes clear if a single question is asked--how much of our agricultural troubles can be traced to the fact that lands are being cultivated which should not be cultivated? This fiscal year, Uncle Sam will spend more than a billion dollars on agricultural relief. In good part his subsidies and relief grants are necessary because whole sections of the country, like the northern and southern dust bowls, should never have been broken to the plough, because there are roughly 500,000 submarginal farms which yield virtually nothing in taxes, provide the families tilling them only the barest existence and give rise to an endless series of social sores.

Rural zoning strikes at the root of these evils. That our rural tax lists should be padded with socially unproductive lands is the natural result of our traditional land policies. The philosophy of the homestead laws was to get lands out of the public domain into private hands so these lands could be exploited and taxed. No distinctions were drawn as to which lands might prove assets and which liabilities.

However well-suited such a policy was to a frontier society with huge quantities of raw land to be developed, it hardly fits today's situation. Today there is no pressing need of bringing more land under the plough--on the con-

trary. Moreover, today, if a man makes a mistake, if he buys a worthless farm, for example, it is no longer his own, personal tragedy. He goes on W.P.A. or gets his son on N.Y.A. or borrows from Uncle Sam.

Rural zoning helps to bring our land policy up to date. It provides an approved constitutional method of weighing the social values and costs of any piece of land and of restricting its uses for the greatest common good.

To be sure, rural zoning by itself does not insure sound land use--no more than urban zoning insures a well-planned city. But urban zoning does lay the foundations for such planning. Through rural zoning any group of farmers can create a flexible land-use blueprint for their community, a blueprint which they can modify at any time by local action.

That is what zoning has done for cities. That is what it can do for our farms.

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U. S. Department of Agriculture
Farm Security Administration
January 29, 1940

